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ONE OF OUR RED VISITORS USED TO BE A SPY'S BOSS

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Jermen M. Gvishlani, one of Russia's foremost managers and a son-in-law of Soviet Premier Alexei N. Kosygin, is the erstwhile boss of a man who is believed to have provided the West with the most successful espionage operation of the cold war.

Mr. Gvishlani, who ended a brief visit to the U. S. yesterday after a relatively minor United Nations assignment, was the superior of Col. Oleg V. Penkovsky, who was executed last year as a spy for the U. S. and Britain.

Neither Mr. Gvishlani's family connection, nor his top-drawer position in Russian industry, nor his ironical relationship to a confessed spy for the West, seemed to be recognized by many diplomats and officials with whom he dealt.

So explosive was the detection of Penkovsky as a spy for the West that there were changes in the Soviet military high command and a worldwide shakeup in Russian intelligence services.

One of the minor mysteries, in the eyes of students of Soviet affairs, is how Mr. Gvishlani managed to keep his job. The question has never been fully answered. But his survival is regarded by a Soviet affairs specialists as much a testimony to his competency as a driver of the Russian scientific and industrial machine. As to his family connections,

Mr. Gvishlani holds the post of deputy chairman of the USSR State Committee for Co-ordination of Scientific Research, an agency whose functions extend far beyond its title and takes in fundamental planning. Before he departed the U. S. yesterday he had attended a two-week session of a UN committee dealing with science and technology. Extra-curricularly, he met with dozens of American business executives and conveyed to them the feeling that Russia's new regime is anxious to work for expansion of East-West trade, and better relation generally.

The Penkovsky Affair gave Russia a spy scandal that has been compared to the Alger Hiss case in the U. S.

Penkovsky served as deputy head of the foreign department of Mr. Gvishlani's committee. This gave him access to key scientific and industrial information, and to persons on the highest levels of the Soviet bloc.

According to the confession he gave at a show trial, Penkovsky passed to the West data that included information on Soviet rocket secrets and on troops in East Germany, on Moscow-Peking relations and on other political, economic and military matters over a period of 17 months.

His co-defendant, Greville Wynne, a British business man, was accused of serving as Penkovsky's courier. Last April, Mr. Wynne was swapped in Berlin for Gordon Arnold Lonsdale, whose real name is Conan Trofimovich Molody, a Soviet spy who ferreted out British submarine secrets.